

JOHN BARNES

The making of a legend: Henry Lawson at Bourke

‘If you know Bourke, you know Australia’, Henry Lawson wrote to Edward Garnett in February 1902, a few months before returning to Australia from England. He explained to Garnett that his new collection of stories, which he then called ‘The Heart of Australia’, was ‘centred at Bourke and all the Union leaders are in it’.¹ (When published later that year it was entitled *Children of the Bush* – a title probably chosen by the London publisher.) A decade after he had been there, Lawson was revisiting in memory a place that had had a profound influence on him. It is no exaggeration to say that his one and only stay in what he and other Australians called the ‘Out Back’ was crucial to his development as a prose writer. Without the months that he spent in the north-west of New South Wales, it is unlikely that he would ever have achieved the legendary status that he did as an interpreter of ‘the real Australia’.

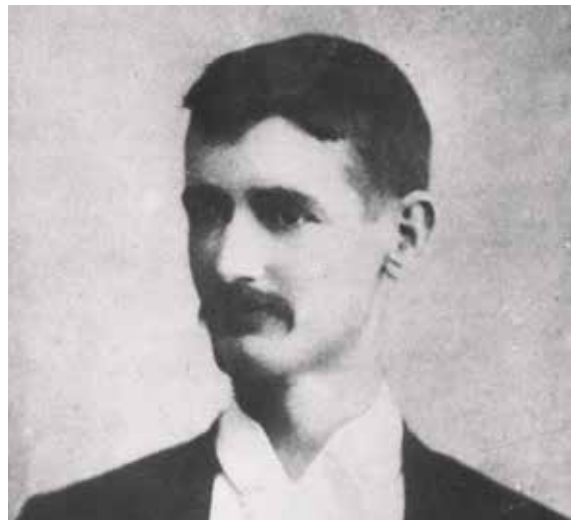
II

In September 1892, Henry Lawson travelled the 760-odd kilometres from Sydney to Bourke by train, his fare paid by JF Archibald, editor of the *Bulletin*, who also gave him £5 for living expenses. Some time after Lawson’s death, his friend and fellow writer, EJ Brady, described how this came about. Through his contributions to the *Bulletin* and several other journals, Lawson had become well known as a writer, primarily as a versifier; but he found it almost impossible to make a living by his writing. He appeared to have gained some financial security when in 1891

he was appointed to the staff of the *Boomerang*, a Labor paper in Brisbane, but the job lasted less than a year. Back in Sydney, he was struggling to survive as a freelance. Archibald, whose attitude towards Lawson seems to have been almost fatherly from the beginning, was concerned with what was happening to one of the most talented of his contributors. Brady recalled how, one morning at the *Bulletin* office, Archibald asked him what was wrong with Lawson: 'he is not all right: he is coming in here in the morning with tobacco juice running down his jaw, smelling of stale beer, and he has begun to write about "The Rocks". The next thing he will be known as "the Poet of the Rocks".' Brady told him that Lawson would be all right if he could get away to the bush, but he had no money. It was then that Archibald made his offer, which Brady represents himself as persuading Lawson to accept.²

Brady's version of how Lawson came to make the trip to Bourke does not say whether Archibald, Brady, or Lawson himself suggested Bourke as an alternative to Sydney. Most probably, as the administrative centre of the north-west region of the colony, with a population of over 3000 and about 200 businesses, Bourke seemed an obvious starting point for someone wanting to get to know the country 'further west'. The terminus of the western railway from Sydney, Bourke was a flourishing inland port – the largest in Australia – to which carriers brought in wool which was loaded on barges to go down the Darling River, and from which they took out to the towns and stations supplies that had been brought up on the river or on the railway. Unionism was strong there – as had been shown during the shearers' strike of 1891 – and so Lawson could expect to encounter men whose political outlook he shared, which would have been a further inducement for him to go to Bourke.

It is perhaps misleading to say, as many have done, that Archibald sent Lawson to the Far West in search of 'copy'; but, certainly, in giving him the opportunity to travel to Bourke, Archibald must have hoped that the trip would stimulate Lawson to write more about aspects of bush life. In July that year Archibald had published in the *Bulletin* Lawson's verse, 'Borderland', which initiated a staged public argument in verse with AB 'Banjo' Paterson about the characteristics of bush life. Lawson adopted the pose of one who was disillusioned after going 'up the country' and discovering the appalling reality that 'Southern poets' had falsified in their romantic verse. His images of 'burning wastes of barren soil and sand', and 'rainswept wildernesses that are the wildest of the wild', and of 'gaunt and haggard women', 'wild selector's children' and 'the lone sundowner tramping ever onward through it all', come partly from his own experiences as a youth on a poor selection on the central plains, and partly from convention. Stereotypes of the bush (which



Left: Jim Gordon (Jim Grahame), 1920s. Bread and Cheese Club portraits. Pictures Collection, H28050/3b

Right: Henry Lawson at Bourke in 1892. Photograph by C Wilson. Pictures Collection, H30827

encompassed both the life of selectors, which Lawson had known in his youth, and that of stations, which Paterson had experienced) were by now a regular feature of the verse, prose and illustrations in the pages of the *Bulletin*. In 'Borderland' (retitled 'Up the Country' when collected), Lawson presents himself as faced with a choice of Sydney or the Bush and chooses Sydney. Paterson's reply, which sets up a contrast favouring bush living over that in the city, ends with the stinging couplet:

You had better stay in Sydney and make merry with the 'push',
For the bush will never suit you and you'll never suit the bush.

In his response to Paterson, Lawson calls him 'City Bushman', and observes that 'the city seems to suit you while you rave about the bush'.

Like so many of the writers and artists who were creating 'the Bush', both Lawson and Paterson were then living in Sydney. The verse controversy displayed their differences in temperament and their experiences of country life. Paterson rejected Lawson's view that bush life was nothing but unrelieved hardship and suffering in an inhospitable landscape. He had already established himself as a bush balladist with two of the most popular poems ever published in the *Bulletin*: 'Clancy of the Overflow' (1889) and 'The Man from Snowy River' (1890). The poem about Clancy, which represents the daydreams of the office worker in the oppressive city who envies the freedom of the drover in the outdoors and fancies that he would like to change places with him, is one of Lawson's main targets in his exchange with Paterson – and other *Bulletin* versifiers joined in the assault on this romantic image.

The joust with Paterson was very much in Lawson's mind when he travelled to Bourke. On arrival he wrote to his aunt, with whom he had been staying in Sydney: 'The bush between here and Bathurst is horrible. I was right, and Banjo wrong'.³ A major consideration when he accepted Archibald's offer must have been that it would enable him to go 'up the country' for the first time in his life.

Archibald's offer was the first of several attempts made over the years by Lawson's wellwishers to save him from the destructive influences to which he was vulnerable in Sydney, the city that had become his base after the family selection at Eurunderee, in central New South Wales, was abandoned. It is too crude to say that Archibald sent him to Bourke to dry out; if that had been the intention a Sydney clinic or rest home would have been a better choice than a town that Lawson called Comeanaveadrink. Lawson already knew his weakness all too well – 'I'm an awful fool', he told his aunt in a letter reporting how, a few days after his arrival in Bourke, barmaids at the Great Western Hotel sent him to bed 'boozed'; and he assured her, they wouldn't do it again. Later in the letter he told her: 'I must take to the bush as soon as I can'.⁴ Lawson quickly came to understand that Bourke represented not only fresh possibilities but familiar dangers.

III

Until *Henry Lawson: A Stranger on the Darling*⁵ by Robyn Burrows and Alan Barton was published in 1996, accounts of Lawson at Bourke were sketchy, relying upon what could be gleaned from a few letters that he wrote while there, the brief reminiscences of Jim Gordon (who wrote under the name of Jim Grahame) written long afterwards, and specific references in Lawson's prose and verse. He stopped well short of this period when writing his autobiography, and none of the reminiscences by his friends recall him talking about it in any detail afterwards. Thanks to Barton's research at Bourke, it is now possible to form a clearer picture of what happened between Lawson's arrival as a rail passenger on 21 September 1892 and his departure, possibly as late as June 1893, again by rail but, this time, as a drover 'in charge of five trucks of cattle'.⁶

Lawson's first impressions of Bourke were positive, as he told his aunt: 'It is a much nicer town than I thought it would be. ... Think I'll be able to hang out all right. ... Might take a job if I see a chance.'⁷ Within a week he was telling her that he was 'doing a little work *sub rosa* for the Western Herald'.⁸ None of the seven verses that were published in the newspaper over the next few weeks bore his name. Six were satires, signed 'Tally', that formed part of

the newspaper campaign directed mainly in support of Hugh Langwell, a local Labor member of the NSW parliament, and against WN Willis, another local member, and his associates. Willis was, among other things, the proprietor of the rival Bourke newspaper, the *Central Australian and Bourke Telegraph*, and is now remembered as one of the corrupt group that Cyril Pearl called the ‘wild men of Sydney’.⁹ Lawson’s first contribution, ‘Our Members – Present and Future’, separated the sheep from the goats among the local politicians. He told his aunt that the editor had ‘sent for the Labour leaders to give me some points for a local political poem’. As he had been in Bourke barely a week by the time the poem was ready for publication, it was an impressive demonstration of his ability to knock out rhymes to order.

Lawson’s stay in Bourke began with his doing the sort of hack work that he had been doing in Sydney for John Norton’s *Truth*, which was, coincidentally, founded by Willis. As Lawson had said in ‘The Cambaroora Star’ the year before, ‘It was nothing very new / To be writing yards of drivel for a tidy little screw’. The seven political poems are republished in *Henry Lawson: A Stranger on the Darling*, with a valuable account of the context to which they refer. The appearance of the first poem in the *Western Herald* drew a verse reply by ‘Smoko’ in the *Central Australian*; ‘Tally’ retaliated; and, when ‘Smoko’ retaliated in turn, ‘Tally’ roundly abused ‘Smoko’. A suspicion was voiced at the time that ‘Tally’ and ‘Smoko’ were the same person. When ‘Tally’ acknowledged this suspicion in ‘The Poet by Telegraph’, he claimed that the verses by ‘Smoko’ were sent from Sydney; but his assertion of his integrity did not actually amount to a denial:

‘Twould be like the dirty dodges that the *Central* people play,
If I wrote for both the papers, and from each received my pay.
Let them shuffle as they must, and let them slander as they will,
I was always true to Labor, and I’m loyal to it still.

John Hawley, the contractor in Bourke for whom Lawson later worked, claimed many years later that Lawson had told him that he had written for both papers, and that EJ Brady had recognised his style.¹⁰ There is now no way of comparing the verses of ‘Tally’ and ‘Smoko’ as files of the *Central Australian* have not survived. Nor is there any way of knowing whether Lawson was being merely opportunistic, or whether he was involved in some sort of intrigue intended to benefit the Labor men backed by the *Western Herald*. There is, however, no doubt that he formed strong friendships with a group of union leaders in Bourke, particularly Donald Macdonell, a shearer and later an MP, whom he greatly admired.

It does seem very likely that Lawson went to Bourke hoping for employment as a journalist, and that he sent his poem, 'A Stranger on the Darling', to the *Western Herald* before leaving Sydney. The poem was published on 1 October, but in the issue of 14 September there had been a note saying that the *Western Herald* would be 'very pleased to publish the verses sent us by "Simple Stranger", if he would forward us his name (not for publication)'. The 'first impressions' that the poem supposedly offers – that Bourke was a place of 'liars' and heavy drinkers – hardly depend upon firsthand experience of the place. Lawson did not need to have been in Bourke to know that the Darling River was 'rather muddy, and the plains a trifle bare', and that the girls were 'fairly pretty' and the liquor 'pretty fair'. On arrival he must have identified himself and made an arrangement to write for the paper. Verse was a novelty in the *Western Herald* (that was probably true of the opposition paper also), and it would appear that, in employing Lawson, the editor was never interested in doing more than temporarily exploiting that novelty for his political campaign.

Lawson told his aunt that the editor wanted to give him a notice, but 'I preferred to keep dark for a while'. The fact that he had his photograph taken within days of arrival tends to support the notion that a notice was planned. In the event, no photograph and notice appeared, and his authorship of the verses in the *Western Herald* was never publicly revealed. However, readers of the Bourke newspaper who were familiar with Lawson's writing may well have recognised the pseudonym, 'Joe Swallow', with which 'A Stranger on the Darling' was signed. And, when Lawson's account of his trip to Bourke, 'In a Dry Season', appeared in the *Bulletin* on 5 November, just a week after the last of 'Tally's satires in the *Western Herald*, the identity of 'Labor's unknown ally' (as 'Tally' described himself in 'Old Labor and the Echo') must have been apparent to anyone who read both publications.

IV

At the end of 'In a Dry Season', when it was first published in the *Bulletin*, Henry Lawson added: 'P.S. Never tackle the bush without a good mate. With one you can do anything and go anywhere'. He had travelled to Bourke alone but, not long after he wrote the sketch, he found 'a good mate'. For an account of their relationship one has to depend mainly upon Jim Grahame's memories, set down over 30 years later.¹¹ According to Grahame, these two strangers on the Darling, both lonely and hard-up, felt an immediate rapport when they met in the main street of Bourke. 'I was lonely, and somewhat frightened and home-sick', Grahame recalled, 'and he was alone, pacing the footpath up one

side and down the other.' When Grahame spoke to him, 'he looked up suddenly and had on his face the look of one who was embarrassed at being caught daydreaming'. Grahame, who was only 18 at the time – Lawson was 25 – was a Victorian, knocking around and taking whatever job he could get. When he accepted Lawson's invitation to join 'a couple of us camped in a place just across the billabong', he did not know the identity of this man who 'seemed different to all the others'. Lawson had checked into the Great Western Hotel on arrival in Bourke but, by the time he met Grahame, which cannot have been more than a fortnight after his last appearance in the *Western Herald*, he was living rough and short of money.

In his earliest account of their meeting, Grahame recorded an exchange that does not appear in later versions and was omitted by Colin Roderick in his biography of Lawson. Grahame wrote: 'In front of an old fashioned looking pub he halted for a second and said casually "Do you shicker?" And when I replied in the negative he again chuckled softly and said "Nor do I"'. Grahame makes no reference to Lawson's drinking during the time that they were together, and it may be that, having a mate who didn't get drunk, helped Lawson to control his weakness. If Grahame's memory is accurate, Lawson got a job as a house painter the next day. The building contractor remembered the 'peculiar' circumstance that Lawson, who had served an apprenticeship as a painter, had come 'carrying two paint brushes out in front of him, stock of brush outwards (emblem of trade)'.¹² Grahame was taken on by the same contractor, but was sacked within a fortnight because his work was unsatisfactory.

When his newly acquired mate, unemployed once more, decided that he would look for work in the bush, Lawson gave up the painting job, joined the General Labourers' Union, and with him walked over 60 kilometres to Toorale station.¹³ They were not well prepared to go bush: 'I've rarely seen meaner swags from that day to this', Grahame reflected; and he remembered that, not long after they set out, they scavenged for cast-off boots at what had been a surveyors' camp. At Toorale, where they both worked in the shearing shed as rouseabouts, Lawson was restless and unhappy. For Grahame it proved to be 'a dreary time', with Lawson 'moody most of the evenings, as a rule lying on his bunk from tea-time until the lights were out, talking very little and gazing at the cobwebby corrugated-iron roof'. In Grahame's eyes Lawson was 'a man apart, having little in common with those whom he worked with'. Any illusions that Lawson may have had about what unskilled itinerant bush workers were really like, and the conditions under which they worked, were dispelled.

Lawson and Grahame left Bourke on 24 November and were back there before Christmas Day. The shearing had cut out in mid-December, so they cannot have worked for much more than three weeks. On Boxing Day, Lawson wrote to his friend, Arthur Parker, that he had returned 'after working a month in a shearing shed on the Darling', and that he was about to 'start north' with his mate.¹⁴ He and Grahame took the Bourke–Hungerford track, heading for Queensland. For at least part of the way they were accompanied by Ernest De Guinney, who had been in Bourke recruiting for William Lane's New Australia movement. On reaching the border post of Hungerford, Lawson wrote to his aunt that he was 'a beaten man', and that he would start back for Bourke the next day (17 January 1893), '140 miles by the direct road'.¹⁵

It had taken over a fortnight to reach Hungerford and, because they had not stuck to the track, the men had walked considerably more than the distance that Lawson estimated for the return trip. What is often overlooked by those who now celebrate 'Lawson's trek' as a feat of physical endurance is that Lawson and Grahame (and possibly De Guinney), in heading towards Hungerford, were looking for work. Lawson's report to his aunt indicates how deeply shocked he was by the experience: 'No work and very little to eat; we lived mostly on Johnny cakes and cadged a bit of meat here and there at miserable stations. ... You can have no idea of the horrors of the country out here. Men tramp and beg and live like dogs.' After telling her that he would return by 'the direct road', he added a postscript, saying that he would go 'off the track to try to get a few weeks work on a Warrego station'.

Lawson's experience is documented, as far as is possible, in *Henry Lawson: A Stranger on the Darling*. Alan Barton's careful research, however, has been unable to throw much light on what happened when the mates got back to Bourke. Grahame says, cryptically, that 'friends [which may be a way of referring to family members] discovered me and consigned me, as a "colonial experience" to a very far-back station'.¹⁶ Neither Lawson nor Grahame ever put much on record about the time that they spent together in the 1890s. In 1916, soon after they met again for the first time after Bourke, Lawson remarked in print that they hadn't yet got to speak of the past, and that there was 'a certain shyness about the matter'.¹⁷ In the interval they had changed so greatly that their friendship at Leeton in 1916 was on a new basis, and Lawson became 'Uncle Harry' to Grahame's children. Camping trips with Grahame along the Murrumbidgee – like Lawson's youthful expeditions with Arthur Parker and the 'bummer push' at Mount Victoria – were of a different order of experience, with none of the real hardship that they had known on the Hungerford track. In the two months that he and Grahame walked and

worked together, Lawson discovered for himself what ‘mateship’ (which he described in a piece in the *Worker* in 1894 as an ‘egotistic word ... born of New Australia imagination, and gushed about to a sickening extent’) really meant in the bush. He formed other friendships in Bourke, but none of them was as important as the relationship with Grahame.

Soon after his return to Bourke, Lawson reported to his aunt that he was again working as a painter. In the same letter he mentioned having some work to do for the *Western Herald*, but there was no reappearance of ‘Tally’ or ‘Joe Swallow’ in the pages of the newspaper. There is no conclusive evidence of how long Lawson remained in Bourke, getting whatever manual work he could. He may have attended political meetings, such as an address that Lane gave on the New Australia movement, but it is unlikely that he took any interest in the literary and cultural activities in Bourke. Had he been so inclined he could have become a subscriber to the Mechanics’ Institute, which had a library of over 2000 volumes and a range of magazines; and, in April 1893, he could have attended Sydney University Extension classes, which had been established following a visit to the town by AW Jose a few weeks before Lawson first arrived. (Three years later Jose was to edit Lawson’s work for publication by Angus and Robertson and, in the process, to provide the title for *While the Billy Boils*.)

At Hungerford, as he told his aunt, Lawson had determined that once he got back to Bourke he would ‘find the means of getting back to Sydney – never to face the bush again’. It took him weeks, and possibly months, to find ‘the means’. A comment in ‘In a Wet Season’, written to parallel the sketch of his arrival, ‘In a Dry Season’, leaves no doubt about his feelings: ‘We only thought of escaping from the bush’.

V

‘Most of my hard-up experiences are in my published books,’ Henry Lawson wrote in “Pursuing Literature” in Australia, ‘disguised but not exaggerated’. The degree of ‘disguise’ varies. There are opinion pieces, such as ‘Some Popular Australian Mistakes’, in which he is both forthright and extravagant, offering such observations as: ‘a shearing shed is perhaps the most degrading hell on the face of this earth.’ Most of the descriptive sketch ‘A Rough Shed’ is given over to a commentary by ‘a rouseabout of the rouseabouts’, who tells what it is like for a ‘lost soul’ in this ‘hell’. ‘Stragglers’, a sketch written soon after his experience of working in a shearing shed, describes a group of ‘travellers’, who are camped in a hut at the end of the shearing season: they ‘have a kind of stock hope of getting a few stragglers to shear somewhere, but their main objective

is to live till next shearing'. They are 'bush outcasts', whose lives are governed by the iron law of their existence: 'To live you must walk. To cease walking is to die'. As he memorably expressed it in the poem, 'Out Back', published a few months later, 'time means tucker, and tramp you must'.

Apart from the Hungerford letter that Lawson wrote to his aunt, there is little specific detail of what happened to him and Jim Grahame during the time that they were itinerant bush workers. There is an incidental reference in 'The Ghosts of Many Christmases', where he recalls how they spent New Year's Eve on the Warrego River, 'hunting round in the dark and feeling on the ground for camel and horse droppings with which to build fires and make smoke round our camp to keep off mosquitoes'. During the day they were plagued with flies – a familiar enough experience to foot travellers.

Grahame afterwards wrote conventional 'bush poetry', but in 'The Old Mates' – one of his tributes to Lawson – the description of how the two thin, bony men slept out in all weathers, and 'scraped a hollow in the soil/ To place our hip bone in', rings true. The physical hardship was bad enough, but the sense of degradation was worse. In Lawson's memory, the kindness of 'Baldy' Davis (the original of his character 'Baldy' Thompson) of Kerribree station towards the 'travellers' contrasted sharply with the meanness that they encountered at other stations.

Although there is little detail to go on, no reader of Lawson's work can doubt that he was deeply affected by the actual experience of going 'up the country'. When, after his return to Sydney, he mocked 'popular Australian mistakes' about the bush, he concluded with a declaration that sums up the impact of the Bourke experience:

We wish to Heaven that Australian writers would leave off trying to make a paradise out of the Out Back Hell; if only out of consideration for the poor, hopeless, half-starved wretches who carry swags through it and look in vain for work – and ask in vain for tucker very often. What's the good of making a heaven of a hell when by describing it as it really is we might do some good for the lost souls there?

The men carrying their swags on the track, 'poor, hopeless, half-starved wretches' looking for work – itinerant bush workers such as he and Grahame had been – were now at the centre of his highly subjective vision of the bush. Most commentary on the effect on Lawson's writing of his time in Bourke emphasises the new subject matter, but of greater significance is the new *perspective* on bush living. After Bourke, and for the first time, he wrote of the bush as it is experienced by the landless swagmen.



The house in which Henry Lawson and Jim Grahame are said to have lived in Bourke. From WJ Cameron, *Bourke: A pictorial history*, Bourke, NSW: Bourke Wool Press/Bourke Historical Society, 1982, p. 62

Alan Barton's documentary research in *Henry Lawson: A Stranger on the Darling* reveals how far Lawson was from being a reliable and objective reporter. The New Zealand writer, Frank Sargeson, once pointed out that Lawson was 'not a "realist" in the journalistic sense of the word: the "realism" he is concerned with is to be found inside himself'.¹⁸ This is exemplified in the two most memorable sketches drawing directly upon the Bourke experience: 'The Union Buries its Dead' and 'Hungerford'. 'The Union Buries its Dead' (written while he was in Bourke) was prompted by a drowning fatality that occurred shortly before he and Grahame left Bourke. The *Western Herald* report of how a drover drowned, in spite of the efforts of one of his mates to save him, is reproduced in *Henry Lawson: A Stranger on the Darling*. Lawson, who had just become a unionist, chose to write about the funeral of the dead man that the union officials organised. On first publication the sketch was subtitled 'A Bushman's Funeral. A Sketch from Life'; and Lawson told Edward Garnett that it was an unornamented description of a funeral that he had taken part in, adding: 'it is true in every detail'. His style is that of a reporter, but the intensely ironical sketch is the personal impression of a participant, one of the 'fourteen souls following the broken shell of a soul', who feels, as the clods fall on the coffin, 'It didn't matter much – nothing does'.

In 'The Union Buries its Dead', the Out Back is revealed to be a place where the ideal of human solidarity is mocked by the reality: 'unionism is stronger than creed. Drink, however, is stronger than unionism.'

In 'Hungerford' the travellers discover a border town, which is a visible contradiction: a town in which 'an interprovincial rabbit-proof fence – with rabbits on both sides of it – runs across the main street'. 'I have been accused of painting the bush in the darkest colours from some equally dark personal motives,' Lawson was to write when challenged a few years later. His reply to

this criticism was: 'I might be biased – having been there'.¹⁹ Such an assertion was hardly necessary. His stories and sketches after Bourke, whether or not written in the autobiographical mode, imply a narrator who belongs to the bush. There is a marked difference in tone between 'The Bush Undertaker', completed not long before the trip, and the products of his stay in Bourke. The ending of 'The Bush Undertaker' suggests a narrator who has observed the 'hatter' but feels no connection with him: 'And the sun sank again on the grand Australian bush – the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird, and much that is different from things in other lands.' Compare that with the ending of 'Mitchell: A Character Sketch', which appeared in the *Bulletin* as early as April 1893 and is obviously drawn from the sort of experience that Lawson and Grahame had 'on the track'. The sketch, wonderfully economical in its presentation, is mainly dialogue, in which Mitchell displays his ability to get 'tucker' from the cook on 'a very mean station'. It ends with the admiring comment of the narrator, who sounds like a mate of Mitchell's: 'But Mitchell's head wasn't gone – not much. He was a Sydney jackeroo who had been round a bit – that's all.' This sketch was quickly followed by 'On the Edge of a Plain', which also focused on Mitchell. The originality of such sketches, in which the seemingly casual prose implies so much more than appears on the surface, was hardly comprehended at the time of publication; but no reader doubted that the author knew the bush at first hand.

Lawson's contemporaries, finding in his work an authentic reality that they could share, were led to identify him with his subject matter and to think of him as a bushman. When his first book was published in 1894 it was hailed by AG Stephens: 'Henry Lawson is the voice of the bush, and the bush is the heart of Australia.'²⁰ And, when *In the Days When the World was Wide* was published in 1896, the title page had a vignette, drawn by Frank Mahony, representing Lawson as a swagman. This image of the writer 'on the wallaby' encapsulated the impression of him that readers gained from his writing after his stay in Bourke.

VI

By the time that *Children of the Bush* was published in London in 1902, Henry Lawson's reputation as 'the voice of the bush' was as firmly established abroad as in Australia. 'He shows us what living in the bush really means,' EV Lucas wrote in a review of *While the Billy Boils* for a London journal.²¹ In what was probably the most discriminating piece of critical writing about Lawson to appear in his lifetime, Edward Garnett's essay, in the same journal in 1902, identified the 'special value' of Lawson as being 'that he stands as

the representative writer of a definite environment'. Garnett saw in Lawson's work a quality that was largely missing from the work of English writers: 'Nothing is more difficult to find in this generation than an English writer who identifies himself successfully with the life of the working democracy, a writer who does not stand aloof from and patronise the bulk of the people who labour with their hands.' In his judgment 'the most casual, "newspapery" and apparently artless art' of a story like 'The Union Buries its Dead' carries with it 'a truer, finer, more delicate commentary on life than all the idealistic works of our genteel school of writers'.²²

Lawson's letter to Garnett, quoted at the beginning of this article, was written after reading the essay, which had not yet been published. He had already discussed the new book with Garnett, and, in an earlier letter had written: 'I intended to publish another new book of mixed sketches before the novel, but since my last chat with you I run [sic] "Mitchell" through the stories and he linked them together.'²³ In telling Garnett that the stories in the new book centred on Bourke, Lawson was underlining the point that it was not a miscellaneous collection; and in saying that if you know Bourke you know Australia, he was confirming that his work had the representative value that Garnett saw in it.

Lawson, now at a critical stage of his writing career, was very conscious of being an Australian writing for an English audience – and feeling the need to interpret and explain what he would have taken for granted in writing for the *Bulletin* and other Australian papers. In 'The Union Buries its Dead', apart from a reference to the Darling, the locality is not named. By contrast, in 'That Pretty Girl in the Army', the narrator assumes a foreign readership that requires background information: 'Bourke, the metropolis of the Great Scrubs, on the banks of the Darling River, about 500 miles from Sydney, was suffering from a long drought when I was there in '92.' And, in the same story, mateship as it is found in Australia is explained: 'The Australian Bushman is born with a mate who sticks to him through life – like a mole.' The stories in *Children of the Bush* contain more descriptive local colour and explanatory detail than is common in Lawson's earlier work. The noting of reference points – pubs in Bourke, the Hungerford track, Baldy Thompson's West-o-Sunday station – appears to be aimed at strengthening the impression that the stories and sketches come out of a community.

At the time he wrote these stories, Lawson was under great personal stress in his marriage following his wife's breakdown, and he was facing the probable wreck of his hopes of establishing himself as a writer outside Australia. The inspiration for the Joe Wilson stories, which represented a solid but

incomplete achievement, had come from his knowledge of life on a selection and his personal experience of marriage and fatherhood. But even in the *Joe Wilson and His Mates* volume there were already signs that his imaginative energy was flagging. Under the impact of the Bourke experience he had produced some of his best and most original work, and, in recalling that experience he may have hoped that he could to some degree repeat that success.

The stay in Bourke in 1892 and 1893 had been painful for Lawson personally, and that pain could be felt in the writing. Meeting him a year later, John Le Gay Brereton found him ‘full of his experiences in the bush, where his deafness, sensitiveness, diffidence and a melancholy tendency to dwell upon the pains of life had exposed him to misunderstanding and misery’.²⁴ It was then that he told Brereton that ‘the Australian worker is a brute and nothing else’, a remark that Brereton interpreted as coming from ‘the bitterness in his heart, after association with the careless, rough company of the shearing-sheds’. Lawson had been almost in the position of a ‘new chum’, and in ‘The City and the Bush’ (*Worker*, 1894) he had chastised ‘a certain class of Australian bushmen’ for their treatment of new-chum jackaroos. His account in that article of how ‘a young man from the city’ was mocked by shearers ‘because he looked intellectual – or “soft” if you like it better’ directly reflects what had happened to him.

By contrast, the later stories of Bourke present bush life as viewed in soft focus, without the kind of awareness and the intensity of personal feeling that mark so much of what he wrote in Bourke and immediately afterwards. The tone of the volume, *Children of the Bush*, is set by a prefatory poem, ‘The Shearers’, which celebrates ‘mateship born of barren lands’ that is exemplified in these bush workers. The narrator in several of the stories is ‘Harry’, a house painter who mixes with the shearers as an equal. In ‘Send Round the Hat’, for instance, Harry is staying in a shanty in Bourke with shearers who treat him as one of their own. Some Bourke union officials whom Lawson knew are introduced under their own names as characters in the story. The real-life name of the Giraffe, the central character who is ‘a type of Bushman that I always liked’, is given; and the narrative is presented as an affectionate autobiographical reminiscence by the author who sits ‘writing by lamplight in the midst of a great city’. The Giraffe is the very embodiment of the spirit of mateship that, so the story implies, is characteristic of Bourke – and of Australia.

‘Send Round the Hat’ and other Bourke stories in *Children of the Bush* offer an idealised version of bush life, which amounts to a retreat from his earlier vision, a denial of what he had found so painful. The ‘dark’ feelings that

Lawson personally experienced in 1892 and 1893 are excluded from the picture he now gives of a bush community. The difference in attitude is epitomised in a sketch called ‘The Romance of the Swag’, in which Lawson begins by talking about the loads that he has carried: ‘And I’ve carried swag for months outback in Australia – and it was life, in spite of its “squalidness” and meanness and wretchedness and hardship, and in spite of the fact that the world regarded us as “tramps” – and a free life amongst *men* from all the world.’ Looking back, he no longer represents Bourke as the ‘Out Back Hell’; in his memory it has been transformed into a place where fellow-feeling triumphs over adversity.

VII

In *Henry Lawson By His Mates*, John Le Gay Brereton recognised that, among the bush workers, Lawson ‘had not easily found the great fellowship which he seems to have expected’, describing him as having ‘a sensitive heart which ached for friendship and understanding’.²⁵ Now that we know so much more about Lawson’s time in Bourke, we can see more clearly how, as a writer, he responded to the reality that he found so confronting. His authority as an interpreter of bush life, which was the foundation of his reputation, derived from his ability to deal with that personal experience; but the characterisation of him by Brereton and others as ‘the poet of mateship’ passed over the extreme discrepancies and the contradictions in his responses to bush life, and tended to favour his weaker, more conventional, and even sentimental writing.

AG Stephens complained that, in much of his work, Lawson ‘saw Australia through the distorting glass of his own moody mind’;²⁶ but it is precisely his personal vision that gives his fiction from that time such interest for readers today, who are no longer in thrall to the mythology of ‘the Bush’. In a curious way, the later Bourke stories, on the surface so persuasively ‘realistic’ but essentially ‘romantic’, complement the earlier. The lonely young man – ‘a man apart with little in common with those he worked with’, as Jim Grahame saw him – had not found a sense of community in the Out Back; but his older self, isolated and unhappy and far from Australia, imagined just such a community of bushmen as he had hoped to find there. More than the work of any of his contemporaries, the differing versions of Bourke to be found in Lawson’s stories and verse offer an insight into the formation of the Australian Dream.

This article is the result of a visit to Bourke in September 2014 with John Thorn, whose musical program of Lawson poems was part of the Festival of a Thousand Stories that year. I wish to thank the organisers for their hospitality and the opportunity to go on the Poet’s Trek from Bourke to Hungerford, with special thanks to Paul Roe for his insights.